

The Gospel – Christian Aid and the churches

Rt Rev John Gladwin (Bishop of Chelmsford and Chair of Christian Aid)

50 years ago, when Christian Aid was a small and very young body, we were not talking as we are today about the threats to our environment, or about global terrorism and all the insecurities associated with that. Then we were entering the era of independence, of the struggle against apartheid and the hopes that were associated with the 'wind of change' beginning to sweep through Africa. We knew little or nothing of the challenges of new technologies, new communications systems and an international liberalised economic order.

The fundamentals, however, remain the same. Christian Aid exists to challenge poverty in our world, to expose its causes and challenge the churches and the powerful to take the action needed to resist the fatalistic doctrine that there is nothing we can do.

Christian Aid is the formal development agency of 39 churches in Britain and Ireland. The churches are there to hold us to account over what we say and do. In this there are three important questions to consider:

1. **Are we Christian enough?** We would say that the work of challenging poverty in our world is close to the heart of the meaning of the Gospel. It needs no other justification. It is our desire to work with the churches and our brothers and sisters in Christ struggling against the curse of poverty. Many of our key partners are churches or ecumenical agencies or agencies rooted in Christian faith. The Directorate and the Board see the strategic importance of the churches in the developing world in the task of tackling poverty. We are here to help. But sometimes we have a lot to do to enable the churches to be ready and able to play their part. Our African brothers and sisters talk about holistic theology, the gospel holding evangelism and social action indestructibly together. They see Christian Aid as a partner in developing the social action side of the Gospel ministry. We are not an evangelistic

agency. We are a mission agency - making the face of the Gospel visible through our solidarity with all who challenge poverty. There is one more aspect of this - commented on in the Guardian during Christian Aid Week.

It has sometimes been suggested that the word 'Christian' in our title does not help us with the public in this country. The Guardian suggested that people are beginning to use a new reason for not giving to Christian Aid. That is about being linked to the churches who some see as out of date, anti-women and anti-cultural equality - part of the past oppression not of the future of opportunity. We are proud to be the churches agency. We hope that what we stand for and seek to do is evidence that the churches are part of God's future for humankind not agencies of that which is passing away.

2. **Are we relevant to the issue?** Christian Aid might be attacked from both ends. We are too big and have become just like any other large and powerful charity. We are too small and can never really make much of a difference. None of us should be afraid of the debate about how to tackle poverty. The churches' work in this area cannot be exempt from critical assessment. Poverty is remarkably persistent. It seems to resist the best endeavours of many. Often when you seem to make progress, something happens to set it all back.

Are we wasting our money and our time? Crucial to Christian Aid is its partnership working. All our history tells us that the building up of the local and the voluntary endeavours of communities is not only the most effective way of tackling deprivation and need, but also the way to build freedom and democracy. When you work with local partners you help create opportunity - for women, for culturally excluded communities, for people whom power would leave disenfranchised.

Tyranny always attacks the freedom of what we call 'civil society'. That network of self-generating agencies that keep human communities human. Poverty will be tackled bottom up first - through the capacity of the community to build the sub structure of its own life. When you visit our partners - in Dalit communities in India struggling for land rights - or with key rights agencies in Mozambique liberating women into power - you see how vital this approach really is.

We can be a big player in the development world of the UK, provided we continue to work in genuine partnership with those who, in the local community, are seeking to roll back poverty and discrimination.

3. **Are we too 'political'?** They said that of us when we fought apartheid. They are saying it of us about the trade campaign. We do not know what we are talking about! It is the experts in the West who know the inside of the global economy who know best. Our politics are biased, our economics are naive...you have heard it all before. But we are giving voice to our partners. Our partners are not fools. They see the outcome of the impact of powerful global forces in a liberal economic order.

It's not that we have the answers. We do not have an economic programme for the reform of the international systems of finance and governance. But we can set the agenda of the questions and give voice to those who are often silenced or unable to speak, and who will tell of the devastating impact of what is happening upon their local communities. In Kenya people said to me, 'your abuse of the environment leading to global warming is destroying our harvest here, and the people are short of food'. Are we going to think about the world's poor when we think environment, or only about how we can keep our lifestyle going a little longer? The local economies of the developing world need a voice because they have no real power over the international order.

The world we are living in is getting more fragile. Its victims are, as ever, the weakest and most disposable. Life for agencies like Christian Aid will get more uncertain and more contentious in the next decade. Poverty is manifestly not going away. In spite of the grand schemes of governments and the international order, all the signs are that none of the targets which they set for themselves will be met. That is why Christian Aid is crucial to the witness of the church to the Gospel hope in Jesus Christ. Christians, and others who have caught a vision of a future shaped in hope, will connect with Christian Aid and bodies like it. Stirring up the churches to become agencies that turn hope into action is a major agenda in itself. One that is often far removed from what we actually talk about and seek to do. Christian Aid is not in the business of preserving the present order, but of changing it.

That is surely a challenge for us all.

Mothers Union



On Tuesday 9th January 8.00 p.m. in the Church Meeting Room, we shall hold our AGM and plan our programme for 2007.

Ann Stephens-Jones

Women's Fellowship

We had a very pleasant tea-party at our November meeting. After doing a quiz and playing Lotto we enjoyed a cup of tea, cake and biscuits.

There is no meeting this month.

The Annual General meeting will be on Wednesday 28th February 2007 at 2.30 p.m. in the Church Meeting Room. This will be followed by a talk by Mrs Stella Frost.

With Best Wishes for a Happy New Year to everyone

Mary Geering